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# *On The Way*

*Occasional Papers  
of the Wisconsin Conference  
of the United Church of Christ*

## **The Vision That Has Formed the United Church of Christ**

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*Volume 3, Number 2  
Winter 1985-1986*

# Baptism

## Sacrament of Christian Vocation

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THE TITLE GIVEN to this presentation on the Sacrament of Baptism requires a few words of explanation. The title, *Baptism—Sacrament of Christian Vocation*, is not intended to suggest anything new. Rather, in treating the Sacrament in a somewhat non-traditional way I am seeking to underline the urgent need to reconsider the place of baptism in the life of the Church today. In a succeeding presentation on the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, a related accent will be obvious, for we shall speak of *Eucharist—Sacrament of Christian Discipleship*.

There are many reasons for attempting a re-interpretation of the sacraments by accentuating the themes of vocation and discipleship. Nearly forty years ago Paul Tillich wrote of the "death of the sacraments" within the Protestant movement. He assessed the disastrous consequences of such a loss in these words: "A complete disappearance of the sacramental element (not the same thing as particular sacraments) would lead to the disappearance of the cultus, and, finally, to the dissolution of the visible church itself." The loss of a clear sense of the place of the sacraments is, of course, a cause of the loss of a sense of the sacramental element in the life of the Church. This has been widely experienced in Western Protestantism. However, it is certainly cause for thanksgiving to God that through these past forty years a countervailing trend has appeared—a concern about the sacraments that has yielded some important developments.

Two things have happened to move discussions about the sacraments from a traditional "in-house debate" about differing accents and practices into the arena of questioning their place in the life of the Church as we approach the twenty-first century.

The first development exhibits an awareness of the new context in which the Church must re-think the meaning and place of the sacraments. This is the awareness that in the Western world the Church is increasingly in a missionary situation. We have heard much of this, and in the coming years we will begin to experience rather dramatically the impact of the minority status on the life of the Church. A little more than a year ago, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin of the Church of South India, but now retired in his home in England, gave the Warfield Lectures at Princeton Seminary.

The title of his presentation was "Can the West Be Converted?"<sup>2</sup> His answer to the question posed in that title underlines the radical thinking required of the Church in these times. That thinking inevitably touches our understanding of the sacraments. The substance of Newbigin's argument is that the Church in the Western world has obscured and distorted the Gospel in its surrender to the privatized world of personal judgment and in its abandonment of the public world to a new and hardened paganism. It is not difficult to see the distortion of the Gospel in the privatization of the sacraments resulting from this trend. Newbigin calls for a new corporate sense of the faith, in which the sacraments regain their original place in the life of faith.

The second development relates directly to the sacraments. It is exhibited in the World Council of Churches' *Faith and Order Paper No. 111*, known to many as the BEM documents (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry). The introduction includes these words, perhaps familiar to those of you who have been involved in a study of BEM: "We live in a crucial moment in the history of humankind. As the churches grow in unity, they are asking how their understandings and practices of baptism, eucharist and ministry relate to their mission in and for the renewal of human community as they seek to promote justice, peace, and reconciliation."<sup>3</sup>

These two developments mark a radical shift in the discussion of the sacraments. For many generations the meaning of the sacraments has been characterized in terms of "what" they accomplish, and "how" they accomplish certain benefits for the believer—always related to the individual's salvation. Today the questions of "what" and "how" are giving way to the question of "why?" That is, why are these ancient and revered rites of the Church important to the Church's mission today? It is in response to this question "why?" that we want to speak of Baptism as the Sacrament of Christian Vocation, and the Eucharist as the Sacrament of Christian Discipleship. It surely is obvious, of course, that the question of "why" will also involve the "what" and the "how." And along the way we shall discuss these in relation to aspects of our understandings and practices in the United Church of Christ.

### I

From this general introduction, then, we turn to the subject of baptism. Why does the Church in these critical times continue this religious ritual which is not only often accompanied by mushy sentimentality but is also among many people so little understood? An illustration of the problem is given by Laurence H. Stookey in his book, *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church*:

Early in this century, a baby born in England, Lucille by name, was taken by her maternal grandmother to the local Wesleyan Chapel to

be baptized. Lucy's father, a sturdy Anglican, was skeptical about the whole proceeding since the Church of England does not regard Methodist clergy as being in the Apostolic Succession. So he took Lucy to the Anglican parish church where she was baptised again. Now Lucy's mother was a convert to the Salvation Army and didn't think much of either the Wesleyans or the Anglicans. So she took Lucy to the local citadel for presentation under the banner of blood and fire—the Salvation Army's counterpart to baptism.

In time the family emigrated to the midwestern United States. The community they moved into had neither an Episcopal church nor an Army citadel; so the family attended the Methodist church. As a teenager, Lucy joined a class of those preparing to take the vows of church membership. Now it happened that the pastor was one of those mavericks who looks upon the practices of his own denomination with disapproval, and regards the baptism of infants as a misguided tradition. He therefore decreed that all in the class had to be *truly baptised* at the font on the day of their vows. Lucy's mother discovered what was afoot and said: "Absolutely not. Three times is enough for anyone." But Lucy was a good psychologist and knew that once her mother was seated in the church she would not make a scene. When the rest of the class went to the font so did Lucy.

Now it came to pass that some years later Lucy fell in love with, and married, a Southern Baptist—but not without a pledge from him that she need not be baptised yet again. He agreed that she was quite sufficiently initiated into the Church, and all was well—until they moved to a community where they attended a Baptist church that was in need of a pianist. Lucy loved to play, and seemed to be a providential gift to the congregation. But, ruled the deacons solemnly and steadfastly, unimmersed hands may not play the Lord's song for us. And so, for the fifth time, Lucy was initiated into Christ's Church.<sup>4</sup>

While that account is an extreme example of confused thinking, mixed motivation and practice in the Protestant use of baptism, it does illustrate the all-too-common reality of the strange admixture of folk religion, superstition, denominational parochialism, and a limited understanding of the New Testament in today's baptismal practice. A recent personal experience underlines the confusion; and this is an incident in a congregation of the United Church of Christ. I was asked to participate in the baptism of a child of the pastor by preaching and reading the baptismal liturgy. As we gathered about the font with the family, I began to read the liturgy. At the appropriate time the pastor, who wanted to do the act of baptism, took the child, uncovered the font and placed his hand in it. At that point I realized that the font contained no water. This did not stop the pastor who went through the motions of placing his hand three times on the child's head. What does baptism without water mean? Is the

symbol of water essential to baptism? If it is not, is any symbol of importance? These are questions to be considered seriously today.

Over against that picture I am pleased to draw one out of another recent experience when we worshipped in a nearby Lutheran church where the Sacrament of Baptism was being celebrated that day. The striking aspect of that service was its liturgical and Gospel integrity. For the first time in decades we heard a baptismal sermon linked directly to the focal event of the service. Based on II Corinthians 4:7-12, the sermon interpreted in simple and direct fashion the relationship of Christ's life and death to the life of the child being baptised; and, of course, to the lives of all baptised persons. There was nothing sentimental in that message; it was, in one sense, starkly realistic about the nature of suffering and death in life in Christ; but at the same time it was comforting and reassuring in its underlining of the magnificent promises of the Gospel. It was a powerful, moving time of worship in which the entire congregation, as well as the parents of the child, were helped to see the power of this sacrament.

There are signs of significant and serious addressing of the meaning of baptism for our time. The most important of these directs us to the theme of the Sacrament of Christian Vocation. To this we now turn.

## II

To speak of Baptism as the Sacrament of our Vocation (calling) is not to attempt a new definition. It is, rather, to lift up an accent or theme running all through the New Testament teaching. Christians are a *called* people. The Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry underline this in every event and every teaching. Further, the presupposition of the Pauline epistles is the *called* community. In writing to the Church in Rome, in Corinth, in Ephesus, the apostle addressed those "called to be saints."

Strangely, however, most baptismal liturgies make no reference to "call;" although, in some respects the concept is implicit. The accent falls, rather, upon the gifts of grace in the relationship with God in Christ, signed and sealed in the act of baptism for the benefit of the individual; and further, upon the sign and seal of forgiveness and incorporation into the Church. In this way baptismal liturgies even today underline the *benefits* of baptism for the baptised person. The fact is that these liturgies represent the "religionizing of the Gospel" which became a marked feature in the Church of the third and fourth centuries and thereafter. Religion's focus is always upon the benefits to be derived from a relationship with God. But the *focus of the Gospel* is upon liberation from the bonds of self-serving religion and, at the same time, upon a new life given and realized in answering *God's call*.

Religion asks: "What happens when I become a Christian, that is, what is there in it for me?" "How does it happen?" And through the centuries much of the Church's energy has been given to answering such

questions. In the process, the Church took charge of the spiritual pilgrimages of all who sought assurance. In so doing, as is well known, the authority and power of the Church grew and baptism became a means of establishing ecclesiastical domination of human life. The sacraments, not only Baptism and the Eucharist, but the others of the Medieval Church became instruments of control and oppression.

The Protestant movement of the sixteenth century Reformation did set up a powerful counterforce to these religionizing aspects of the Church's life. To learn that one is justified by grace through faith according to the promise of the Gospel, was to be liberated from ecclesiastical oppression. To know baptism as the sign of grace, unlimited by human pretension, and to know that by baptism one enters the realm of new life by the power of the Spirit—to know these things was to know the power of baptism.

But the threat of "religionizing" the Gospel was not removed by the Reformation. It continued in new ways to be exhibited in the misinterpretation of the Gospel, limiting the free grace of God, devising new forms of control of human destiny. The Protestant accent on the freedom given by the Gospel was changed into the ideology of human autonomy, thus seeming to counter the "tyranny of the ecclesiastical hierarchy" with the "tyranny of the individual." By the eighteenth century it was already clear that new forms of religion, though subtly designed, were undercutting the power of the new life in Christ.

Religion, as we have said, accentuates the *benefits* to be secured in a relationship with God. The Gospel calls for a renunciation of that kind of *use* of God, and for a surrender to the life Christ gives. It is the recapturing of that insight and teaching that we seek to express in calling Baptism the Sacrament of Christian Vocation.

### III

Baptism became a major theme of theological discussion in the churches in large part because of the work of the Faith and Order movement, beginning in the third decade of the present century. That movement, incorporated into the World Council of Churches shortly after World War II, has exerted continued pressure on the churches to re-think baptismal theology and practice.

It was in this context that the United Church of Christ made its first and, in my judgment, most important statement about baptism. In the Statement of Faith, adopted in 1959, the sacraments (as Roger L. Shinn has said in *We Believe: An Interpretation of the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith*) are put in a "context that is strange to many churchmen."<sup>5</sup> That context is the "mission of the Church." And Shinn points out that baptism is "the symbol. . .of an entrance into the missionary community that continues Christ's reconciling ministry and shares in his death and resurrection."<sup>6</sup> That is what we say when, in the words of the

Statement of Faith, we confess (acknowledge) that we are "called to share in Christ's baptism, eat at his table, and join him in his passion and victory."

"Called to share in Christ's baptism"—this is our Christian vocation. It is ironic that this understanding of baptism was not given expression in the two baptismal liturgies produced by the United Church of Christ since 1959. I confess to some embarrassment about this because its absence in the baptismal liturgy in *Services of the Church* (1967) was produced by the UCC Commission on Worship of which I was a part. It is also disappointing to note that the new baptismal liturgy to be published next year gives only a hint of the Gospel concept of baptism as the sacrament of vocation. "To share Christ's baptism" is a theme that should have prominence in our liturgical material, not only for the sake of consistency but also as an expression of our ecumenical responsibility, especially since the publication of the BEM documents.

It should be noted that in the "Order for Baptism to be Administered With the Rite of Confirmation" (in the 1967 *Services of the Church*), there is this powerful passage: ". . . baptism is the sacrament through which we are united to the Lord Jesus Christ and given part both in his offering of himself and in his conquest of evil. It is the visible sign of an invisible event: the reconciliation of men to God. . . ."<sup>7</sup> This is a clear expression of the point in the Statement of Faith. It is, of course, true, that in part of our tradition the emphases upon vocation in God's mission is made in confirmation, not in baptism. But failure to include it in baptism has weakened the meaning of that sacrament and has made confirmation more important. (The problem related to the misunderstanding and misuse of confirmation will come into our discussion later.)

"Called to share in Christ's baptism"—the phrase, as you know, derives from the Pauline teaching, especially in Romans 6:4—"We were buried therefore with him by baptism unto death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." An additional facet of meaning is derived from Jesus' words in Mark 10:38-40: "With the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized." To share that baptism is not primarily to receive personal benefits; it is, rather, to enter a new calling, a new vocation, a new life, characterized by self-giving rather than self-seeking, shaped by a life that brought hope to the hopeless, and strength to those who were weak and ill. All the marks of the baptism we are called to share with Christ are evidence of a new and different realm of human existence in which self-advantage is renounced for the sake of the other. This is the import of Christ's baptism at the hands of John. For there he identified himself with the outcast, the needy, the sinners, with those who made no claim on God but awaited Divine mercy. For Christ's baptism gives shape to the mission of the Church. And that is the shape of the vocation (calling) signed and sealed in our baptism.

What does this mean for the practice of baptism in the United Church of Christ? We cannot deny that our baptismal practices are often lacking in emphasis upon vocation. We live in that part of the world where privatistic Christianity effectively seals itself off from the needy, the oppressed, and the outcast. Denominational church life for its own survival demands of us the wisdom, resources, and energy required so desperately for a needy world. Can we move beyond the pressures of self-serving religious life to the life to which Christ calls? We need new and vital images of Church life if the mission of justice, peace, and reconciliation is to be accomplished. That is possible, I believe, by a faithful and responsible use of Baptism as the Sacrament of Christian Vocation. What is necessary?

The liturgical and educational life of the Church must be organized around the full meaning and practice of baptism. It must cease being an occasional religious rite, available upon request and at the convenience of those seeking it. As the Sacrament of Christian Vocation it is a rite to be used with the utmost seriousness and planning; it must be kept at the center, not the periphery, of the Church's worship and nurture. This will require re-education and continuing nurture of adults, youth, and children. It means:

a) Re-thinking the meaning of the relationship between baptism and confirmation. Two errors in confirmation result from a misunderstanding of baptism. First, confirmation is seen as the "rite of joining the Church." As such, it implicitly denies the meaning of baptism as "incorporation into the Church which is Christ's body." It further withholds from the baptized child all of the needed nurturing of faith—a nurturing usually delayed until puberty. Second, confirmation instruction is primarily designed as a means of generating faith through knowledge. The early Church understood instead: "Credo intelligum" ("I believe that I may understand"). Confirmation instruction should focus upon training for the Church's mission.

b) Re-consideration of the appropriate time for baptism—a consideration involving aspects of family life now rarely considered, especially in view of the change in family structures in this time.

c) Re-conceiving the role of the family relationship in the nurture of faith, thus moving the major responsibility from the "educational process" to the "nurturing process."

### *Conclusion*

It is in this emphasis upon Baptism as the Sacrament of Vocation that the Church will be able to address the problems of community, justice, peace, and reconciliation in our time. Faithfulness to this vocation is not an assurance of success or security for the Church. To be a faithful witness of God's presence and work in the world is to risk all known securities.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tillich, Paul, *The Protestant Era*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie, "Can the West Be Converted?" *Princeton Bulletin* 6:1, 1985, pp. 25 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith & Order No. 111, 1982, pp. viii-ix.

<sup>4</sup> Nashville: Abingdon, 1982, pp. 11-12.

<sup>5</sup> Philadelphia, Boston: United Church Press, 1966, p. 105.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> *Services of the Church*, Philadelphia, Boston: United Church Press, 1967, No. 3, p. 13.